

**Media Statement
21 August 2020**

Health Worker Safety is of Paramount Importance to the Department of Health

The Department of Health remains committed to securing the health, safety and wellbeing of all frontline health care workers.

To this end, the department has an Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) workstream as part of the Incident Management Team, which focusses specifically on managing significant outbreaks, in the current case, the COVID-19 outbreak.

The OHS workstream has members from all provinces, trade unions, academic institutions, and professional bodies. Working together, these members draft and provide guidelines for health and safety interventions as well as training of healthcare workers through the National Institute for Occupational Health (NIOH). There are OHS Coordinators at provincial Departments of Health and OHS Committees at provincial, district and facility levels in line with the provisions of the Occupational Health and Safety Act, No. 85 of 1993. These committees also have trade union representatives and monitor health and safety of healthcare workers at their workplaces. Whilst we acknowledge that there may be some challenges in the functionality of these committees in some provinces, the Department of Health continues to place emphasis on the operationalization of these committees and is working hard to ensure that these committees are in place and function in accordance with the legislated framework.

The health and safety of healthcare workers is a priority for the Minister of Health and the health and safety of healthcare workers is also being monitored through reporting at the National Health Council and Technical National Health Council. As early as April 2020 the Minister had requested that the involvement of Unions in OHS committees at provincial, district and facility levels be strengthened to ensure there is always good flow of information between employees and management at all levels. Additionally, unions accepted an invitation to be part of the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Social Behavioral Change, which is an important and influential platform that provides opportunities to intervene on matters of occupational health.

The provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for healthcare workers is monitored by the Department through a digital system whereby provinces report on their stock levels of PPE on a daily basis. These reports are reflected in real time on a national dashboard. The spreadsheets from these dashboards are extracted for presentation to the Minister, the National Health Council and Technical National Health Council on a regular basis.

It has been on this basis that the Department has always asserted that nationally there is enough PPE stock in the country but there has been an acknowledgement that the issues pertain to the movement and distribution or redistribution of stock. This is urgently being addressed at provincial level, hence the importance of the involvement of Unions to assist with monitoring and reporting impending stock shortage together with management so that employers and employees can work together in a co-operative manner to protect Health Care Workers

Says Minister Zweli Mkhize, "As a doctor myself, I can never be detached from the experiences, concerns, hopes and aspirations of my colleagues. Our health care workers are the pulse of the COVID-19 response and therefore it is not only our duty but our imperative to protect our frontline workers at all times. I wish to assure my colleagues of our continued commitment to constantly engage and co-operate to find lasting solutions for a healthy workforce."

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